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ABSTRACT

This paper lists practices recommended by the Council for Exceptional Children's Division for Early Childhood concerning program evaluation in early intervention and early childhood special education programs for infants and young children with special needs and their families. An introductory section notes the guiding assumptions upon which the recommended program evaluation practices are based. A framework for the recommended practices is then discussed, categorizing the indicators according to four attributes of a program evaluation: utility, feasibility, propriety, and technical adequacy. Twenty-three recommended practices are then listed, within the categories of utility, feasibility, propriety, and technical adequacy. The recommended practice indicators are not exclusively bound to any particular evaluation model, and are not specific to a single program evaluation decision, evaluation object, or evaluation type. (Contains 10 references.) (JDD)

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# Program Evaluation

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Recommended practices for Program Evaluation are based on a number of guiding assumptions. First, program evaluation is not a homogeneous construct. There are broad spectra of potential purposes, methods and audiences for program evaluation in early intervention. Likewise there is substantial diversity in the characteristics of early intervention programs, children and families served by such programs, and the contexts of such programs. The recommended practices for program evaluation reflect fundamental principles that can be broadly applied within the field rather than specific practices that are recommended for specific purposes or contexts of evaluation. That is, the indicators sacrifice specificity for generalizability. It is anticipated that the principles can be refined and operationalized to better serve more narrowly focused needs of specific evaluations.

Second, it was assumed that the availability of established standards for the practice of program evaluation in education and related fields (Joint Committee on Standards of Educational Evaluation, 1981; Rossi, 1982) provides an appropriate foundation for developing standards applicable to early intervention. The existing standards were synthesized and amended to represent the field. Again, the generalizability of the existing principles took precedence over specificity.

The final major assumption was that program evaluation (whether internal or external,

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formal or informal) is conducted under limited resources, limited time, and administrative and political constraints. Due to such limitations, it is not reasonable to assume that all of the recommended practice principles can be met equally well within a given evaluation. Therefore, the "necessity" of a principle should be viewed in the context of the decisions and constraints of the evaluation.

## Overview

The recommended practices primarily represent a synthesis of program evaluation standards presented by the Evaluation Research Society (Rossi, 1982) and the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (1981). Stufflebeam (1990) states that a number of studies which have examined the two sets of standards have found them to be largely overlapping. The framework of the recommended practices in Program Evaluation follows the outline of the Standards for Evaluations of Educational Programs, Projects, and Materials (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1981). The framework categorizes the indicators according to four attributes of an evaluation: utility [those practices that support the ability of an evaluation to serve the needs of evaluation stakeholders (program administrators, program staff, parents, funding agents) in a manner that is credible, informative, timely and influential]; feasibility (those practices that support the conduct of program evaluation within the constraints imposed by limited resources, time demands and the political subtext of early intervention programs); propriety (the ethical and constitutional rights of participants in, and audiences of program evaluation and the

responsibilities of evaluators to protect such rights); and technical adequacy[1] (those practices that support the gathering, analysis, and interpretation of information in ways that are valid, reliable, accurate, representative, fair, and replicable.

A number of evaluation models are available [e.g. CIPP (Stufflebeam, 1983), goal-free evaluation (Scriven, 1972), responsive evaluation (Stake, 1980); illuminative evaluation (Parlett, 1981), discrepancy evaluation (Provus, 1971)]. The recommended practice indicators are not exclusively bound to any particular model. Similarly, the indicators do not encourage specific methodologies for planning, designing or managing evaluations; gathering and analyzing information, or disseminating results. Rather, evaluations should employ the model and methods that best serve both the needs of the evaluation and the principles of recommended practice. This eclectic orientation to models and methods of program evaluation is supported by the framers of the existing standards.

None of the recommended practice principles are specific to a single program evaluation decision (e.g., program revision), evaluation object (community needs, child performance, program cost, staff performance, materials, program components, parent participation, etc.) evaluation type (formal vs. informal, conducted by internal staff or external evaluator, large-scale vs. small). As with the original standards, it was hoped that the recommended practices could be applied by a range of practitioners. These include early interventionists interested in improving the quality of services they provide to children and families; administrators of local early intervention programs interested in evaluating the

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[1]This attribute is titled "accuracy" within the Joint Committee standards but is renamed here for the purpose of clarity.

performance of staff; state-level administrators wishing to determine the cost-effectiveness of services provided to infants with special needs and their families; or a professional evaluator hired to evaluate the differential effects of two early intervention models.

While the specific principles are not ordered in any sequence or hierarchy within the four major attributes, the attributes have been listed in an order recommended by the Joint Committee (Stufflebeam, 1990). The order of the attributes (utility, feasibility, propriety, and technical adequacy) is based on the following logic: (a) before undertaking an evaluation there is a need to be certain that the findings from an evaluation will be useful (e.g., in providing important feedback or assisting in decision-making) (b) if the evaluation is expected to produce some useful information it must be determined if conducting the evaluation would be feasible and efficient given available resources to obtain and report information in time for its use; (c) if the evaluation is determined to be feasible, possible obstacles to conducting the evaluation within the bounds of propriety must be considered; and finally (d) if it is determined that the evaluation can be conducted ethically, legally, and responsibly, the attention and efforts focus on the technical aspects of the evaluation. Stufflebeam (1990) and Worthen and Sanders (1987) present a table which summarizes the Joint Committee's consensus on the relationship of their standards to ten common tasks of program evaluation. While the standards of the Joint Committee and the recommended practice indicators discussed here are different, there is sufficient overlap to make such a table informative to the reader interested in clarifying to which tasks specific principles most clearly apply.

In addition to the consensual validation of these recommended practice principles,

supplemental evidence of their validity is available. Stufflebeam (1990) reviewed studies that have addressed the validity of the Joint Committee's standards (including their applicability to specific situations and disciplines) and concluded that while they are not a panacea, their content is sound and their applicability is well established. An annotated bibliography supporting each of the Joint Committee's standards was developed by Wildemuth (1981). Finally, various published resources in early intervention contain discussion of principles and guidelines similar to those comprising the recommended practices.

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# DEC Recommended Practices
# Program Evaluation

Program evaluation consists of collecting and reporting information to answer significant questions about aspects of programs. Examples of such program aspects include child or family functioning, staff performance, educational materials, transition, classroom environments, parent participation, curriculum, program expenditures and community programming needs. Answers to such evaluation questions might serve: a) to make decisions within a classroom; b) to formalize policy; c) to determine the viability of implementing a new program; d) to modify and improve program practices; e) to determine how funds should be allocated; f) to support the continuation, expansion, or discontinuation of a program; and g) to demonstrate accountability or cost-effectiveness.

Many of the following best practice indicators are congruent with standards presented by the Evaluation Research Society (Rossi, 1982) and by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (Joint Committee, 1981; Worthen & Sanders, 1987). As there is substantial overlap between the two sets of standards and recommendations of task force members, individual citations for the best practice indicators are not provided. The framework for grouping these indicators according to four attributes of evaluation (utility, feasibility, propriety, and technical adequacy) approximates the approach used by the Joint Committee (1981).

## Utility

PE1. Program evaluators or staff identify audiences involved in or affected by the evaluation so their needs and expectations can be addressed and their cooperation obtained.

PE2. The evaluator(s) must be competent (i.e., received training) to perform the desired evaluation and must be trustworthy.

PE3. Information collected is sufficient in scope, and derived from sources sufficient in credibility, to address pertinent evaluation questions.

PE4. Program evaluators describe thoroughly their assumptions, perspectives, methods and rationale used to generate and interpret findings so that the audience can judge the basis for decisions.

PE5. Evaluation reports clearly describe the purpose and rationale of the evaluation, the specific evaluation questions addressed, the program aspects being evaluated (materials, program components, staff performance, parent participation), the programmatic context, the evaluation procedures (design, data collection, analysis, etc.), findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

PE6. Program evaluators present their findings clearly, completely, and fairly in language the audiences understand.

PE7. Program evaluators present multiple findings or recommendations in order of relative importance.

PE8. Program evaluators disseminate their findings in a timely manner so that audiences can best use the information.

## Feasibility

PE9. Program evaluators conduct evaluations with minimal disruptions to the program, staff and families.

PE10. Before beginning data collection, program evaluators, adminstrators, and or staff determine that the evaluation plan is an effective, ethical, legal and fiscally responsible use of resources.

## Propriety

PE11. Program evaluators report findings in a legal and ethical manner that is in due regard for the rights and welfare of participants and audiences.

## Technical Adequacy

PE12. Program evaluators describe the focus of an evaluation (e.g., program, materials) as precisely as possible.

PE13. Program evaluators describe and examine precisely the context in which the object of the evaluation exists to determine the influences of the context on the object.

PE14. Program evaluators describe and monitor the purposes, designs, and procedures of an evaluation in enough depth and precision to permit adequate critique, management and/or replication of the evaluation.

PE15. Whenever appropriate, program evaluators assess multiple sources of information.

PE16. Program evaluators describe and justify sources of information and sampling procedures so that the adequacy and defensibility of information can be assessed.

PE17. Measurement instruments and procedures are appropriate for the characteristics of the respondent (e.g. handicapping condition, gender, language, culture, developmental level).

PE18. Program evaluators select, develop, and use measurement instruments and procedures in ways that assure that the interpretation of the information is reliable and valid for the intended use.

PE19. Program evaluators pilot-test locally developed instruments/procedures to insure technical adequacy, validity and reliability.

PE20. Program evaluators systematically review and correct (if necessary) the collection, storage, management, analysis and reporting of program evaluation data.

PE21. Program evaluators use for data analysis the simplest systematic procedures that are appropriate, given the purposes and design of the evaluation and the nature of the data.

PE22. Program evaluators describe and justify procedures for analyzing qualitative or quantitative information.

PE23. In assessment reports, program evaluators distinguish between objective findings (e.g. statistical and practical interpretations of information), opinions, judgments, and recommendations.